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Trey Fitch

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PERSPECTIVES IN LEARNING

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Education in Costa Rica: Best Practices and Beyond

By Trey Fitch

The National Center for Education Statistics indicated that in 1999, 8th graders in the United States scored below 14 other countries in math and science Achievement. This highlights the need to study best practices of education in other nations. Despite being one of the wealthiest countries in the world America still struggles with its educational system. However, over the past 30 years the outlook has improved. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, American achievement test scores in mathematics and science are characterized by declines in the 1970s, followed by increases during the 1980s and early 1990s, and mostly stable academic performance since then (Campbell, Hombro, & Mazzeo, 1999). Pressure to progress further in this educational arena as evidenced by gains in these test outcomes stems from state and federal mandates (Elmore & Fuhrman, 2001). This pressure can be seen in some states by the linking of achievement to funding and financial incentives (State Legislatures, 2002).

The continued press for increased school performance requires teachers and administrators to explore specific factors that contribute to achievement. Not surprisingly, these factors appear to be universal as shown by a report of Latin American school performance (Willms & Somer, 2001). School resources, income level of the families, frequent assessment, and parent involvement served as major correlates of school success. These factors mirror the elements of successful schools in America (DuFour, & Eaker, 1998). Leaders in education can review schools in other countries to identify common themes of success and borrow best practices from the international school community. The purpose of this study was to identify best practices of schools from an educational success story in Central America.

Costa Rica is considered to be the most developed of the Central American countries because it has a relatively high Gross Domestic Product per capita as well as best indicators of life expectancy at birth, infant mortality rate, and adult literacy rate (United Nations Development Program, 1999). Much of this success has been attributed to its progressive education system. Costa Rica is one of the few countries in the world to exist without a national military system, consequently, more money can be diverted into educational programs. The adult literacy rate is near 95% and rivals the United States where the rate is approximately 99% (United Nations Development Program, 1999). In this assessment, literacy was considered the ability to read and write a basic sentence about a person's daily activity. Although Costa Rica lacks the technological development and higher education training evident in America, it displays many aspects of best practices in education.

Methods

A case study design was used to gather information about the elementary through secondary education system in Costa Rica (Schloss & Smith, 1999, p. 87). A group of 8 graduate students and 5 College of Education faculty members visited 7 schools in Costa Rica. One faculty member from Morehead State University, and graduate students from Kentucky, Ohio, and Tennessee participated as researchers in this study. The research team went to 4 elementary schools and 3 high schools in the San Carlos Region of Costa Rica. This area was chosen as local and national educators in Costa Rica considered it to be a superior region with regards to school success. The schools may not represent the country as a whole, but they display many of the best practices found in the nation.

Researchers used observations, interviews, data reduction, and theme analysis (Schloss & Smith, 1999, p. 87) to collect and organize information. General themes were identified during the initial stages and were modified during the process over a two week period. Team members outlined their notes and extrapolated central themes. These themes were labeled and placed into categories by the team leader. Interviews were conducted to chart information around these themes. The final themes explored were: societal factors; community factors; school climate; classroom practices; and curriculum.

Results

Societal Factors

Broad societal factors impact schools significantly in Costa Rica. The lack of a need for military funding allows for a greater national investment in education. This reflects the values of a society that emphasizes peace and education over military strength. Interviews with national senators highlighted this point and how education is crucial to human and economic development. Interviews with school leaders (including principals, regional supervisors, and members of the national congress), teachers, and students were conducted. The information obtained in these interviews conveyed how students view school as a bridge over poverty. Linking education to personal economics serves as a motivational tool for teachers by showing students the connection between academic success and financial achievement. Students are also motivated through religious influences. A majority of Costa Ricans are Catholic, and the Church maintains a strong influence over the school systems. Several schools required uniforms and showed a presence of religious themes. In this manner, they resembled parochial schools rather than public schools in the United States. Not only are most Costa Ricans Catholic, but 95 % of the country's citizens are of the same ethnic origin.

Community Factors

The schools visited were located near the center of town. Student supplies were purchased and maintained by parents. Interviews with parents and students highlighted the ownership of learning. The responsibility for getting supplies and books was placed on the student and the family, not the school. Communities contained many established families and most students had access

to extended family members. In summary, education was viewed as a core value for Costa Ricans and school was linked to getting oneself out of the cycle of poverty. Community as a whole places much emphasis on education as seen in the funding of schools over military expenditures, and as a result this Central American country has acquired a 95% literacy rate. Schools were centrally located and readily accessible to parents. Parents funded school supplies and appeared to take ownership of the student's success.

School Climate

Interviews with students, teachers, and administrators found one especially interesting finding. Most of the schools averaged few if any fights between students in a school year. The courtyards of several schools contained sometimes over a hundred students with no teacher supervision, and yet no problems occurred. Possibly related to this was the presence of family in the school. Parents were witnessed walking casually on school grounds, talking informally to teachers, and visiting the school's office. In addition, students were held accountable through testing. At the time of our visit, the schools were preparing for a national exam that allowed them promotion to the next grade. The schools maintained a narrow focus on education. Substantial extracurricular and sports programs did not exist. The community was responsible for offering soccer leagues and club opportunities.

Classroom Factors

One theme that surfaced repeatedly during the research process was the sense of resiliency of the classroom teacher and students. Teachers taught around obstacles that in more developed countries might shut down the learning process. For example, several classrooms were lacking electricity, yet class resumed unimpeded. Most rooms did not have computers and many students did not own the textbook.

While traditional methods of lecture and discussion were used also evident was extensive use of cooperative learning. Students frequently worked in groups, less formal than American groups, and student to student interaction was substantial. Classroom behavior problems surfaced as excessive talking or not being on task, but the highly oppositional child or severe conduct disorders were not seen.

Curriculum Factors

Several curriculum factors impressed the team as best practices in education. First, the dedication to bi-lingual education was immense. Third grade children could recite basic English phrases and some were fluent. Students receive English credits throughout their entire education and bi-lingual classes start at young ages. Second, there was a national curriculum so testing was more meaningful and regional curriculum variance was at a minimum. Third, art education was more substantial than in American schools. Students in the fifth grade displayed art projects ranging from pottery to paintings. Student crafted murals could be seen in many schools.

Limitations

This study contained several limitations. A primary limitation was that language barriers required us to use translators for some interviews. In other interviews, no translators were needed but the communication was impeded when both parties lacked proficient fluency in the other language. Accordingly, much of the note taking was focused on identifying themes, as opposed to providing direct quotes from interviews.

Implication for Best Practices in American Schools

1. Costa Rica provides a helpful model for education because of what the country has achieved considering multiple economic and regional barriers.
2. Teachers and students in Costa Rica operate with resilience regardless of resources and obstacles. Instructional time persisted over stifling room temperatures, occasional lack of electricity, lack of textbooks for some students, and in most cases, no technological support.
3. Students recognized the importance of international awareness and were required to learn foreign languages in early grades.
4. Although basic skills were greatly emphasized, art education programs still thrived. The trend in the United States has been to reduce art education. In Costa Rica, creative expression was viewed as complementary to the sciences.
5. National tests are used to advance in school. This helps validate the meaningfulness of the diploma. Carter (2001) noted that leaders in high performing schools strongly advocate for ongoing testing (p. 24-25).
6. Parents accepted responsibility for getting supplies and primary transportation for students. They were visible in the school and supported the teachers. DuFour and Eaker (1998) reported that parent-teacher interaction was a critical factor in student achievement (p. 236-238).
7. Education was valued by the political community. Senators and local leaders when interviewed voiced the message that education is a way out of poverty. Payne, DeVol, & Smith (2001) amplified that a fundamental difference between people in poverty and those in middle class incomes was the perception of education as a link to economic gain (p. 58).

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Trey Fitch has a doctorate in counseling from Texas A&M-Commerce and is an assistant professor of counseling at Columbus State University. He specializes in school counseling and clinical field experience courses.



Peach County High School
collaborative charcoal drawing